



Outlook good for swift-fox program

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*By Steve Miller, Journal Staff Writer*

If the survival rate of swift foxes released on Ted Turner's South Dakota ranch last year is any indication, the future looks good for 30 swift foxes reintroduced into Badlands National Park over the past few days.

Of the 20 adult swift foxes released on Turner's Bad River Ranches near Fort Pierre last fall, 10 were still alive as of Aug. 1, according to Kevin Honness, field biologist for Turner Endangered Species Fund. "We were pleasantly amazed by it," Honness said Wednesday.

"They did exactly what they were supposed to do," he said. "They avoided coyotes, fed themselves over the winter and produced pups in the spring."

Honness said the success of the Turner reintroduction makes him optimistic about the Badlands release. "Certainly, the farther west, the better the habitat gets," he said. "I fully suspect we'll see our two populations mixing together eventually."

The Badlands National Park reintroduction began with two male-female pairs released Saturday at dusk.

The remainder were released Sunday and Monday evenings, according to Marianne Mills, park public information officer.

Those 26 — 13 males and 13 females — were not yet paired up but were a mix of juveniles, sub-adults and adults, Mills said. "We're calling it swift-fox matchmaking," she said.

The idea is for the foxes to mate and begin producing a self-sustaining population, she said.

All the swift foxes released were fitted with radio collars so park staff can track them.

Coyotes are considered the biggest threat to the newly released swift foxes, Mills said. The swift fox typically weighs less than five pounds.

The reintroduction was the first planned release in the park, with further releases scheduled over the next three years, according to Greg Schroeder, swift-fox reintroduction coordinator.

The swift foxes released in the park were captured on private land near Limon, Colo., in late August.

Turner Endangered Species Fund officials provided training to park staff on techniques for capturing and handling swift foxes.

Honness, who lives and works on the Bad River Ranches in Stanley County, said the success of the swift foxes there disproved critics who said western South Dakota habitat would no longer support swift foxes. "It really spoke ... about the quality of the habitat and its ability to support swift foxes," he said.

Turner Fund staffers had trapped their swift foxes in Wyoming and weighed them before releasing them last fall. This spring, they caught 11 of the swift foxes and weighed them. Nine of the 11 had gained weight over the winter, Honness said, another indication of habitat quality.

Swift foxes were abundant throughout the Plains states until the late 1800s to the early 1900s. South Dakota now lists the swift fox as a threatened species.

Honness said four of the Turner swift-fox pairs produced litters of wild pups this spring. He called the 16 pups "gravy" in the survival race.

He wasn't sure how many of those pups survived the summer because he hasn't been able to get collars on them yet. Honness hoped to trap and collar those wild pups in the next couple of weeks.

The Turner swift foxes spread out, from Lower Brule to the east to near Milesville in the west, Honness said. He tracked one female who traveled 200 miles in 72 days, probably looking for a suitable male to mate with.

Unfortunately, last year, there weren't enough available fellas on the swift-fox dance floor. There were only seven males for the 13 females, and a coyote killed one male early on. The other six males paired up quickly.

Honness and other Turner staffers expect to release another 20 swift foxes on the Turner ranch this fall.

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